Collective Memories of Intergroup Conflict

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Each side in a conflict has a different construal of the origins and development of the conflict. Collective memories of past conflicts play an important role in maintaining intergroup violence. For instance, the collective memory of violent events may serve to justify current violence and may help perpetrate and refuel new violence. The reconciliation and conflict resolution literature suggests that addressing the past and acknowledging the harm done by the ingroup are crucial for establishing peaceful relations. (See APOLOGIES AND FORGIVENESS.) However, in order to address the past efficiently it is necessary to understand how groups construe the past of intergroup conflict, and how memories of the past influence current conflict. (See SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY; SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY.)

Collective memories of intergroup conflicts have been the subject matter of different disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology. Each discipline utilizes different methodological and theoretical tools that have led to disagreements on fundamental issues regarding the definition, the content, and the "location" of collective memory. (See NARRATIVE ANALYSIS; QUALITATIVE METHODS AND CODING.)

Broadly, the term collective memory has been used to refer to construals of the group's past. Collective memories of intergroup conflict provide a coherent view of the origins and evolution of conflict, and identify the key events of conflict. As such, collective memory constitutes *what* is remembered (i.e., the specific instances and events) and *how* these events are remembered (i.e., their interpretations). Collective memories don't have to provide a truthful account of what actually happened. The needs and motives of the present shape *what* events are remembered and *how* they are remembered. Considerable research in social psychology demonstrates that groups are motivated to selectively remember some events while forgetting others. Hence, collective memory is reconstructed, remade, or embellished as a function of the present. Bar-Tal (2000) identified four common themes of collective memories of conflict. Each group's collective memory (1) provides a legitimization of the origins and development of conflict, (2) portrays the ingroup in a positive light, (3) delegitimizes the opponent, and (4) focuses on victimization of one's group. (See CONFLICT RESOLUTION, SOCIOPSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO; CONFLICT, CULTURE OF; CONFLICT, ETHOS OF; CONFLICT, INTRACTABLE; DELEGITIMIZATION.) Below, I will discuss how these themes relate to present motives and how they help satisfy societal and individual needs.

A NEEDS-BASED MODEL OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Conflicts, especially violent ones, are characterized by heightened threat to the ingroup, chaos, anxiety, and insecurity for one's well-being. At these times, people feel less control over their lives and their environment. Group members need to make meaning out of the collective experience of conflict. During intergroup conflict, collective memories provide meaning to the current events by situating them to the past context. By providing a coherent narrative of the group

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and conflict's story and relating it to the current conflicts, collective memories provide the context in which the present reality is understood. Mead (1929) goes as far as to argue that if there is no need to account for and understand present phenomena, there would be no sense of history or the past.

Intergroup conflict threatens not only the physical well-being of the groups involved, but also symbolic group identities. Threat to the ingroup strengthens group members' solidarity, commitment to, and identification with the ingroup. The drive to maintain a positive identity and a positive self-image elicits ingroup bias in recollections and interpretations of past or recent events. For example, Liu, Wilson, McCLure, and Higgins (1999) examined how ethnic groups (Maoris and Pakehas in New Zealand) in conflict construe historical events in New Zealand's history. Each group showed ingroup favoritism in interpretation of historical events, and those events that portrayed the ingroup positively were perceived as most important in the history of New Zealand. (See SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY.)

The motive to maintain a positive group identity becomes stronger during periods of intergroup conflict. Conflict is often perceived by opponent groups as a struggle between good and evil. In an attempt to portray the ingroup as the righteous party in the conflict, group members are more likely to make errors and distort the events of the past in ways that portray the ingroup favorably, whereas errors that portray the ingroup negatively are rare (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). Cognitive and motivational processes of selective attention, fabrication, exaggeration, minimization of harm, and denial or distribution of responsibility lead to interpretations of the past that legitimize one's group and delegitimize the opponent. For example, research on people's reactions toward the ingroup's wrongdoing has demonstrated that people often minimize the severity of the harm inflicted, blame or use external circumstances to explain the ingroup's negative actions, or place responsibility for the harm done on the victims.

Collective memory has been a powerful tool of manipulation by leaders and elites to justify and lead groups into collective action. Collective memories not only inform understanding of the present, but they also shape expectations for the future and serve to justify an ingroup's current actions. In some instances, to justify political claims, the memory of events is invoked many years after the event took place. For instance, Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett (1986) claim that the Battle of Masada was forgotten for 2,000 years before being invoked during the rise of Zionism in the early twentieth century. The memory of the battle portrays the last Jewish resistance toward Romans after the fall of Jerusalem in 73 CE. As defeat became inevitable, the Jewish fighters in the Masada fortress committed mass suicide in order to avoid being captured by the Romans. This event signifies the importance of group members' commitment and sacrifice for the group. Similarly, the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 became significant in Northern Ireland only in the nineteenth century. The defeat of James II by William III in the battle represents the victory of Protestantism in the United Kingdom. The victory is commemorated every year by the loyalist community in Northern Ireland.

Whether collective memories of past events portray stories of defeat or victory, glorification or victimization of the ingroup, each story brings about moral obligations for the present. For instance, the defeat of Prince Lazar in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 is the most important event in Serbian collective memory. To Serbs, the defeat affirms their group's historical

victimization. It also signifies the detrimental effect of the ingroup's lack of unity. Thus, the lesson of the Battle of Kosovo emphasizes the need for solidarity and group cohesion, and the need to take action in order to protect oneself.

Collective memories of conflict portray the ingroup as the victim and focus on ingroup suffering and victimhood. Portraying oneself as a victim serves to legitimize current negative actions against outgroup members as well as to establish the ingroup's morality and legitimacy. Threat, fear, and delegitimization of the opponent embedded in collective memories of violent conflict lead to perceiving the adversary as extremely threatening. Consequently, each group is likely to perceive their acts of violence as a response to threat or as provocation by the outgroup. As each group has the right to self-protect, retaliation in response to provocation is considered justifiable. Within this framework, collective memories of past victimization evoke the need to engage in defensive violence, that is, to attack the opponent first in order to defend oneself. Even if the ingroup is viewed as responsible for violent acts, the ingroup's positive image is not threatened if these acts are perceived to be in response to the outgroup's provocation.

Groups attempt in various ways to minimize the harm they have inflicted on others. For instance, in order to diminish the harm done, institutionally or collectively, groups might not accurately count the war victims who are considered the enemy. Media research has shown that representations of the suffering are highly biased to favor the ingroup, in terms of exclusively focusing on the suffering experienced by the ingroup and downplaying the suffering experienced by the outgroup. In turn, only the selected events and experiences that fit the group's image are presented in the media and thus get incorporated into the collective memory. Whereas the events that do not fit the ingroup's image are either reinterpreted or ignored, thus they are forgotten.

WHERE ARE COLLECTIVE MEMORIES LOCATED?

Collective memories are embedded in societal structures and public symbols. Public expressions include historical accounts, oral histories, and rituals and commemorations that function as enactment of the past, but also in physical sites such as public monuments, museums, medals, photography, and other images. The combination of various forms of remembering makes collective memory resistant to time. The public representations of the past events do not only reflect the past, but they also shape group identities and reproduce the past by adapting it to the present context. For example, rituals, performances, and commemorations evoke intense emotions, enhance group solidarity and cohesion, and affirm a certain version of the truth about the past in relation to conflict. Group members' participation in the events and the emotions evoked establish coherence and continuity between the past and the present.

The public expressions and representations of collective memories of intergroup conflict are significant only when they are endorsed and accepted by people. Commemorations and rituals are influential when group members participate and engage in these events. As remembering occurs by the individual, collective memories can also be considered as located in the individual mind.

Memories of past and recent collective events can be the result of a combination of personal experiences and societal influences such as media accounts, history books, and other social constructions. One characteristic of the collective memories of intergroup conflict is that they are shared by group members and are treated by them as a

truthful history. However, depending on the political and ideological circumstances of the society they are part of, people have some choice over the information to which they attend. Factors such as the freedom of information, the degree of conflict about different interpretations of the past, the number of competing claims upon the past, and the structure of society (liberal versus authoritarian) constitute external constraints that influence individuals' choice of information. Indeed, some research suggests that despite the shared part of collective memory, there is some variation in the degree to which group members endorse the collective memories and in the meaning they make out of the ingroup's past. For example, a study assessing Turks' construals of the events leading to the massacres of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century showed that, on average, Turks' construals of these events were in line with the common Turkish government and societal narrative. However, there was also considerable variation in the degree to which individuals endorsed these narratives. This variation was in turn predicted by individual-level factors such as the strength of national identification. Specifically, the more participants identified with the Turkish national group identification, then the more likely they were to deny the massacres of Armenians by Turks, place the responsibility on the Armenians for the violence toward them, and estimate lower numbers of Armenian victims. Understanding variations across and within each group might be important in order to find ways that might lead to transformation of memories.

CONCLUSION

The past and the present of intergroup conflict often intertwine. On one hand, the past provides the context and the lenses through which the current conflicts are interpreted and understood. On the other hand, the needs and motives in the present conflicts lead to reconstructing and reshaping the meaning of the past. Understanding the complex dynamics between the past and the present in intergroup conflict has the potential to provide tools that might help transform intergroup conflict.

SEE ALSO: Apologies and Forgiveness; Conflict Resolution, Sociopsychological Barriers to; Conflict, Culture of; Conflict, Ethos of; Conflict, Intractable; Delegitimization; Narrative Analysis; Qualitative Methods and Coding; Social Representation Theory; Social Representations of History.

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